

New Stallion Giant Surprise is an Immediate Hit

By Bill Heller

Denied a racing career after a spectacular winning debut, Giant Surprise has made an immediate splash as a New York stallion. Standing at Rockridge Stud in Hudson, Giant Surprise ranks seventh nationally among first-crop sires in progeny earnings through the end of September. Another freshman New York sire, Courageous Cat, who stands at Questroyal North in Stillwater, ranks 28th.

Given that Giant Surprise sired undefeated Sudden Surprise, winner of the \$150,000 Bertram F. Bongard Stakes at Belmont Park on September 27th, and Surprise Cameo and Super Surprise, the third- and fourth-place finishers in the \$150,000 Joseph A. Gimma on the same day at Belmont, there's a great chance that all three can increase their earnings exponentially in the two-year-old stakes on New York Showcase Day October 24th.

"I think this horse can go on, not only in New York, but nationally," Lere (pronounced Le-ray) Visagie, owner and manager of Rockridge Stud, said Thursday. "He's a big, impressive horse, 16-2. He covers a lot of ground. There's great potential for the horse."

That potential was evident when he made his debut at Saratoga in 2011, winning by 4 ¼ lengths while getting six furlongs in 1:10.23 for owner Mike Repole and trainer Todd Pletcher. "I think he was a good horse," Pletcher said Friday. "It's not very often that a two-year-old breaks his maiden at Saratoga and gets a 91 speed figure. I think the logical next step up off that kind of performance was to a graded stakes."

Unfortunately, he never got a chance to take that step. His impressive performance came at a price. He had suffered a non-displaced condylar fracture to his left foreleg during the race. Repole retired him, but he didn't abandon him.

"Mike decided to give him a chance at stud," Pletcher said. "Mike has supported him through the auction ring and by breeding mares to him. So far, he's gotten off to a good start. We've been pretty pleased with the ones we have by him."

Visagie couldn't be happier. The 37-year-old native of South Africa came to the United States as an intern and worked at Taylor Made, Lane's End, Questroyal, Lakland North (since renamed Sequel Stallions) and Vinery before deciding to go out on his own in 2013. "It's not a decision you take lightly," he said. "I've been in New York 16, 17 years. Stallions are what I did all those years."

Visagie was oblivious to the fact that the name he chose for his new farm, Rockridge, was also the name of the fictitious town in Mel Brooks' comedy classic "Blazing Saddles." He laughed when asked about it. "I get that all the time," he said. "Rockridge sounded like a good name, something that will transcend time. It's very ironic."

He hopes that Giant Surprise will be iconic as a stallion. His 2015 stud fee of \$2,500, substantially lower than the six first-crop stallions ahead of him in progeny earnings, will be

doubled in 2016. "It could be higher than that," Visagie said. "It could be significant. Everybody wants to have growth and have stallions with stud fees of \$15,000 to \$20,000."

Unlike Giant Surprise, Courageous Cat was able to complete a successful career, earning more than \$1.1 million thanks to six victories, three seconds and two thirds from 15 starts. The son of Storm Cat out of Tranquility Lake by Storm Cat stood for \$6,000 this year at Barry Ostrager's Questroyal North, which is managed by Jay Ryan, who toiled for 17 years as an assistant starter in the starting gate in Maryland and New York before finding a safer profession.

"I had a horse fracture my face in the morning schooling at the Belmont Park training track," he said. "I figured it was time for a change. I wanted to try something different."

Ryan worked for trainer Eddie Gaudet and Sequel Stallions before coming to Questroyal nearly three years ago. "I like everything about it," Ryan said. "It's a great program. We've got some great grass. We feed them well. Great veterinary care."

Ryan said Courageous Cat's immediate success wasn't a giant surprise (no pun intended). "I knew he was going to do well," Ryan said. "We're getting a lot of mares to him. He had 105 last year, and already we've got close to 50 contracts for next year. That's unheard of."

So is a stallion getting his first winner with a first-time starter in a stakes race. But School Board Prez did exactly that, winning an Ohio-bred stakes race in his debut in late July. He followed that with another Ohio-bred stakes victory, giving him \$90,000 in earnings from just two starts.

Ryan hopes Courageous Cat is in the vanguard of even more successful New York stallions: "The whole New York program with the breeders' incentives, you're going to see better-quality stallions."

They're pretty high-quality right now.